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Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Summary

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was founded in 1950 to lead and coordinate international efforts to protect refugee rights and well-being and find solutions to refugee situations. In 2013, there were 51.2 million displaced persons, of whom 42.9 million fell under the mandate of UNHCR. The rise in the number of refugees in recent years has been fuelled by several large-scale crises, coupled with the fact that durable solutions for those in protracted refugee situations have not been achieved at rates commensurate with previous years. Durable solutions are traditionally defined as voluntary return or repatriation, resettlement to a third country and/or local integration into the host country. Efforts to build resilience and self-reliance are interim solutions measures.

The Office of Internal Oversight Services examined the relevance, effectiveness and impact of UNHCR in achieving its mandate with regard to protection, assistance and solutions, with a focus on durable solutions for those in protracted refugee situations. It used a mix of qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods, including surveys, site visits, interviews, an evaluation synthesis, document reviews and secondary programme data analysis.

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UNHCR has responded effectively to the growing number of complex emergency situations and generally fulfilled its protection mandate. It has provided lifesaving assistance and asylum to millions, while continuing to advocate increased protection space. Its results are more mixed in less-visible emergencies where there are funding shortfalls.

UNHCR has had fewer successes in achieving durable solutions for persons of concern in protracted refugee situations. Global returns have been declining, while resettlement, which is resource intensive, provides a solution for less than 1 per cent of refugees. Local integration has largely remained elusive, although UNHCR efforts to build resilience and self-reliance for refugees are slowly expanding.

While political factors beyond its direct control, such as lack of political will, funding restrictions and insecure and unstable environments in countries of origin, often limit the achievement of durable solutions, UNHCR has not fully seized opportunities to address those constraints, such as advocating more strategically with host Governments.

UNHCR has not sufficiently expanded upon its humanitarian imperative to support the achievement of durable solutions, including consideration of development elements. It is largely oriented around an emergency response model and its internal structures, including an annual planning and budgeting process, have hampered solutions programming. It has not fully engaged with development partners on solutions and transition programming.

Recent efforts by UNHCR with regard to solutions have been a step in the right direction and it now has an opportunity to systematize those efforts by engaging in stronger advocacy for solutions options, building greater consensus and more strategic partnerships and refining internal structures, processes and staff skills to meet solutions goals. Greater success in this regard will make the critical difference for the growing number of people suffering in prolonged situations.

OIOS makes the following six important recommendations to UNHCR:

(a) Implement a multi-year planning cycle for solutions-related activities and pursue multi-year funding;

(b) Develop advocacy strategies for solutions at the global, regional and operational levels;

(c) Develop a schedule to ensure the conduct of regular, targeted meetings with development actors around a solutions/transition partnership coordination model;

(d) Develop a staff development strategy to strengthen skills for creating, implementing and assessing solutions strategies;

(e) Review existing internal solutions structures to assess whether restructuring could improve effectiveness in programming;

(f) Create an evidence-based portfolio to be used for strengthening and advocating solutions.

I. Introduction

1. The Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) identified the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for evaluation on the basis of a risk assessment undertaken by OIOS to identify programme evaluation priorities. The Committee for Programme and Coordination selected the programme evaluation of UNHCR for consideration at its fifty-fifth session, in June 2015 (see A/68/16, para. 216). The General Assembly endorsed the selection in its resolution 68/20.

2. OIOS evaluations are undertaken further to Article 97 of the Charter of the United Nations and General Assembly resolutions 48/218 B, 54/244 and 59/272, in addition to the Secretary-General's bulletin on the establishment of OIOS (ST/SGB/273), which authorizes OIOS to initiate, carry out and report on any action that it considers necessary to fulfil its responsibilities. The general frame of reference for OIOS is provided in the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation (ST/SGB/2000/8, regulation 7.1).

3. The overall objective of the evaluation was to determine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, effectiveness and impact of UNHCR in achieving its mandate with regard to protection, assistance and solutions in emergency and non-emergency contexts, with a focus on durable solutions to protracted refugee situations. The topic emerged from a scoping phase described in the evaluation inception paper.[1] The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group.

II. Background

A. History and mandate

4. UNHCR was founded in 1950 to lead and coordinate international efforts to protect refugee rights and well-being and find solutions to refugee situations. Its mandate was subsequently expanded to include the prevention and reduction of statelessness. It also shares responsibility for internally displaced persons with other entities.

5. The main objective of UNHCR is to ensure international protection to refugees and others of concern to UNHCR and to seek permanent solutions to their problems in cooperation with States and other organizations, including through the provision of humanitarian assistance (see A/67/6/Rev.1, programme 21, para. 21.1). In 2003, the General Assembly, in its resolution 58/153, decided that the mandate of the organization would be extended until the refugee problem was solved. Its role has grown beyond an exclusively humanitarian focus as the nature of crises has grown more complex. In 2013, it was responsible for 42.9 million of a total of 51.2 million displaced persons worldwide — the highest figures since the Second World War.[2]

[1] OIOS, Inspection and Evaluation Division, "Programme evaluation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees", inception paper IED-14-007, 8 July 2014.

[2] UNHCR, "UNHCR global trends 2013: war's human cost" (Geneva, 2014). The remaining 8.3 million displaced persons are primarily Palestinian refugees covered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and internally displaced persons for whom responsibility is shared.

Partnerships with Governments, United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations and displaced and host communities are the key modality of UNHCR for providing basic assistance. Contracts with implementing partners accounted for 39 per cent of its total expenditure in 2013.[3]

B. Structure and governance

6. UNHCR is headed by a high commissioner, who is responsible for the direction of the organization, supported by a deputy high commissioner and two assistant high commissioners (one each for operations and protection).

7. UNHCR is governed by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council and reports annually to both. An executive committee, currently comprising 94 States, meets every October and approves the biennial programme budget.

8. UNHCR is headquartered in Geneva. It comprises seven divisions and five regional bureaux (see A/AC.96/1125 and Corr.1) and is present in 456 locations in 123 countries.[4]

C. Global strategic priorities and results framework

9. The goals of UNHCR are articulated in the biennial programme budget (ibid.) as global strategic priorities and include:

(a) Favourable protection environment;

(b) Fair protection processes and documentation;

(c) Security from violence and exploitation;

(d) Basic needs and services;

(e) Community empowerment and self-reliance;

(f) Durable solutions;

(g) Emergency response (as part of support and management).

D. Persons of concern

10. The 42.9 million people under the UNHCR mandate in 2013, referred to as persons of concern, were categorized as follows:

(a) Refugees: persons outside their country of nationality owing to well-founded fear of persecution (11.7 million);

(b) Returnees: persons of concern to UNHCR for a limited period after returning to their country of origin and internally displaced persons who return to their previous residence (1.7 million);

[3] UNHCR, *UNHCR Global Report 2013* (2014). Available from www.unhcr.org/gr13/index.xml. The calculations are based on figures on pages 84 and 113.

[4] UNHCR, *UNHCR Global Appeal 2015 Update* (2014). Available from www.unhcr.org/ga15/index.xml.

(c) Stateless persons: persons not considered nationals by any State (3.5 million);

(d) Asylum seekers: persons seeking international protection (1.2 million);

(e) Internally displaced persons: persons forced to flee from their home or place of habitual residence who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (23.9 million).

E. Resources

11. The budget of UNHCR in 2014 was $5.3 billion, a significant increase from 2012 owing to the rise in funding contributions relating primarily to the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic. Some 98 per cent of the budget comes from voluntary contributions (see ibid.). In 2013, UNHCR had 9,087 staff, 89 per cent of whom were in field offices.

12. The budget is divided into four pillars corresponding to the key groupings of its persons of concern: pillar 1 pertains to refugees, pillar 2 to stateless persons, pillar 3 to persons being reintegrated and pillar 4 to internally displaced persons. Basic needs and essential services comprised 56 per cent of the total requirements for 2014. Some 8 per cent of the total budget for 2014 was allocated to durable solutions, although that figure is not representative of the range of activities that promote work towards solutions, such as education, livelihoods and advocacy, and their costs.

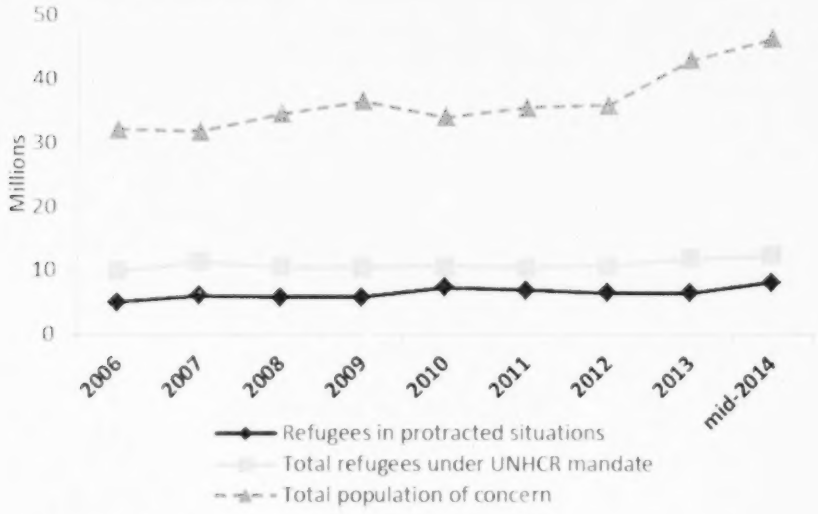
F. Durable solutions

13. The ultimate goal of UNHCR is to achieve solutions and reduce the number of persons of concern. While UNHCR has become increasingly and necessarily focused on recent complex emergencies, a large proportion of the refugee population remain in 33 protracted refugee situations (those in which refugees continue to be in exile for five years or more after initial displacement), as noted in figure I. There are three primary durable solutions: voluntary return or repatriation, resettlement to a third country and/or local integration into the host country.[5] Planning for and implementing solutions covers the full life cycle of displacement and is conducted in partnership with Governments, United Nations and non-governmental organization partners and persons of concern themselves.

[5] UNHCR also works towards the granting of nationality to stateless persons and with other actors towards conditions permitting solutions to internal displacement.

Figure I

Total population of concern, refugees and refugees in protracted refugee situations, 2006-mid-2014



Source: OIOS, from the UNHCR Statistical Online Population Database.

III. Methodology

14. The evaluation generally focused on the past five years. Its results are based on a triangulation of multiple data sources. It used the following combination of qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods:[6]

(a) A total of 162 semi-structured interviews with UNCHR staff, partners, donors, representatives of Governments, Executive Committee members, persons of concern and other stakeholders;

(b) Visits to UNHCR offices and field sites in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan and Zambia, in addition to the headquarters in Geneva. The missions included direct observation of projects, conditions, services, community structures and communications processes;

(c) Web-based surveys of a stratified random sample of UNHCR staff,[7] a stratified random sample of operating and implementing partners[8] and all Executive Committee members;[9]

[6] Given that the main focus of the evaluation was on solutions, OIOS primarily used secondary data and the evaluation synthesis for results relating to emergency response, assistance and protection.

[7] The staff survey was sent to a non-random sample of 601 staff, including all senior and solutions staff, and a random sample of non-solutions protection and programme staff. In total, 314 staff responded (52 per cent).

[8] The partner survey was sent to a non-random sample of 394 partners, including the 100 largest partners, and a random selection of smaller partners. In total, 127 partners responded (31 per cent).

[9] The Executive Committee survey was sent to all 94 members and had a response rate of 19 per cent.

(d) Structured content analysis of key reports and documentation, including UNHCR strategic and financial documents, country operations plans, policies, reports and publications; academic reviews; audits and evaluations; United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks; UNHCR agreements with host Governments; and journal articles;

(e) Tabulation, synthesis and comparative analysis of results from a purposive sample of 53 evaluation reports and reviews;

(f) Qualitative interviews with 28 Iraqi refugees and 45 Syrian refugees in Jordan;

(g) Analysis of UNHCR monitoring and performance data;

(h) Ten focus group discussions with persons of concern;

(i) Visual representations of programme results logic.

15. OIOS consulted UNHCR during the conduct of the evaluation and thanks it for its cooperation and assistance. The annex to the present report sets out the response of UNHCR to the draft report.

IV. Evaluation results

A. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has responded effectively to the growing number of complex emergency situations and generally fulfilled its protection mandate

The emergency operations and basic assistance of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have been effective overall

16. UNHCR has been faced with increasingly complex and growing emergencies. The year 2014 was one of the most challenging in its history owing to the mass displacement caused by continuing crises in the Middle East and Africa. The number of refugees currently affected by the four major "L3" emergencies[10] (the situations in the Central African Republic, Iraq, South Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic) and assisted by UNHCR is 5.6 million,[11] or nearly half of the global refugee population in 2013. In addition, the organization has responded to other smaller-scale emergencies featuring complex security environments and access issues, such as in Chad, Myanmar and Uganda. Multiple simultaneous emergencies have stretched the already limited resources of UNHCR and given rise to substantial reallocations from non-emergency situations. A number of senior staff mentioned that, as the situation stood, an additional emergency would severely strain the organization's capacity to respond effectively.

17. The emergency response efforts of UNHCR have ensured lifesaving asylum and basic services for millions. In 2013 in the Syrian Arab Republic alone, a highly restrictive operating environment notwithstanding, UNHCR was able to reach more than 3.2 million of the 6.5 million internally displaced persons in the country's

[10] "L3" is the Inter-Agency Standing Committee classification for the most severe, large-scale humanitarian crises, requiring a coordinated United Nations system response.

[11] The calculations are based on the most recent figures reported by UNHCR and various Governments hosting refugees (December 2014).

14 governorates, delivering more than 8 million core relief items.[12] Again in 2013, the UNHCR emergency service deployed almost 500 staff to reinforce emergency field operations. The evaluation synthesis results indicated that UNHCR had performed well in high-profile emergencies, such as in Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic, by responding in a timely fashion and preventing a humanitarian catastrophe. It was noted, however, that, in the recent crises in Côte d'Ivoire, Somalia and South Sudan, the response time had been far beyond the benchmark of 72 hours, with difficulties in scaling-up. That situation was mostly due to lack of funding, inadequate staff deployment and recruitment and problems with coordination and management. Although UNHCR is generally able to raise sufficient funds for high-profile crises, it is often constrained when crises arise in environments that are less visible and donor friendly. To reach service standards, UNHCR also depends on partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP), which are also subject to fluctuating funding. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, without the presence of UNHCR in those emergency contexts, millions would have gone without access to asylum or lifesaving support in the form of shelter, food, water or health services.

18. Senior UNHCR staff and partners interviewed also highlighted emergency response as one of the organization's primary strengths and noted recent improvements in response capacity and speed, in addition to the application of lessons learned from previous emergencies. They pointed to improvements in supply chain and logistics processes following the establishment of a regional service centre in Budapest. In Ethiopia, staff and partners interviewed noted that, building on lessons learned from the 2010/11 emergency in Dollo Ado, the response to displaced South Sudanese refugees in Gambella had met almost all assistance targets and coordination had improved.

19. UNHCR has, overall, delivered on its basic assistance mandate. For example, global strategic priority standards for the mortality rate among children under 5 years of age were met in almost all refugee camps and settlements in 2013 (107 of 112 monitored sites). For example, in the Zaatari camp in Jordan, agencies reported that they were exceeding Sphere standards,[13] especially in terms of the amount of clean water available to each person daily, and reaching food security targets. Problems persisted globally, however, with regard to food assistance and nutrition; the results of the nutrition surveys conducted by UNHCR in 2013 indicated that global strategic priority targets had been met in only 47 of 88 camps and settlements assessed.[14]

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has also generally delivered on its protection mandate, although with more mixed results

20. While minimum standards have been established for emergency response and assistance, there are few clear benchmarks for measuring UNHCR results in terms of protection. Measuring the impact of protection programming is particularly complex owing to the expanding typology of refugees and the increase in the

[12] UNHCR, "Massive aid effort accompanied 2013's Syria refugee exodus", press release (Amman, 31 December 2013).

[13] Sphere standards are jointly agreed standards among humanitarian agencies setting common principles and universal minimum standards in humanitarian response.

[14] Camps and settlements assessed in the figures come from UNHCR targets for global engagement areas (aggregated operational-level data).

internally displaced population, and where persons of concern live in communities that are themselves affected by conflict, disaster, weak governance and poverty. The evaluation synthesis presented mixed results in terms of specific aspects of protection such as sexual and gender-based violence.

21. Nevertheless, in a shifting and dynamic global displacement context, UNHCR has made efforts to fulfil its protection mandate, especially in more difficult urban contexts. Results achieved included:

(a) In 2013, some 1.1 million individual asylum applications were registered with Governments or UNHCR — the highest such figure in more than a decade;[2]

(b) In Lebanon, UNHCR registered more than 737,000 Syrian refugees in 2013;[2]

(c) UNHCR met its internal targets of increasing individual registration in 40 refugee situations, while maintaining the levels in 47 others;

(d) UNHCR reported progress in 25 refugee situations regarding systematic issuance of birth certificates, with 18 operations attaining full coverage;

(e) UNHCR effectively used resettlement as a protection tool. In 2013, 47 per cent of the more than 71,000 refugees resettled were referred for resettlement for legal and/or physical protection reasons and included women and children at risk;

(f) UNHCR reached internal targets of continuing to work with 112 Governments to improve legislative frameworks governing refugees and other persons of concern. In 2013, legislative changes were reported in 8 countries and UNHCR was involved in the process of legislative revisions in another 50.

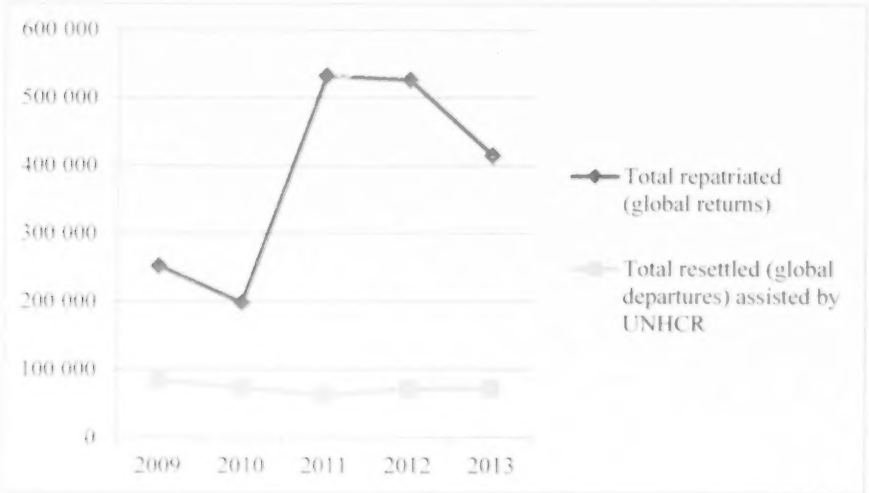
B. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has had fewer successes in achieving durable solutions for persons of concern in protracted refugee situations

22. Owing largely to conflicts and other external factors, UNHCR has been less successful overall in recent years in achieving durable solutions for persons of concern. Traditional durable solutions have remained elusive, in particular for the 6.3 million people in protracted refugee situations in 2013,[15] owing to the constraints discussed further in sections C and D. The evaluation synthesis results showed that most protracted refugee situations had little prospect of resolution in the medium term or the long term. When asked to identify what was not working well in UNHCR, 27 per cent of staff, partners and persons of concern interviewed volunteered an overall lack of results in terms of durable solutions and noted that results were not being achieved at rates commensurate with past years. As shown in figure II, the numbers for two solutions — voluntary repatriation and resettlement — have declined or remained steady in recent years, the increase in the global refugee population notwithstanding. To put this in context, figure III shows voluntary repatriation and resettlement within the total refugee population for 2013.

[15] Or 54 per cent of the refugee population in 2013. OIOS estimates that there were 8.1 million people in protracted refugee situations in mid-2014, or 66 per cent of the total refugee population.

Figure II

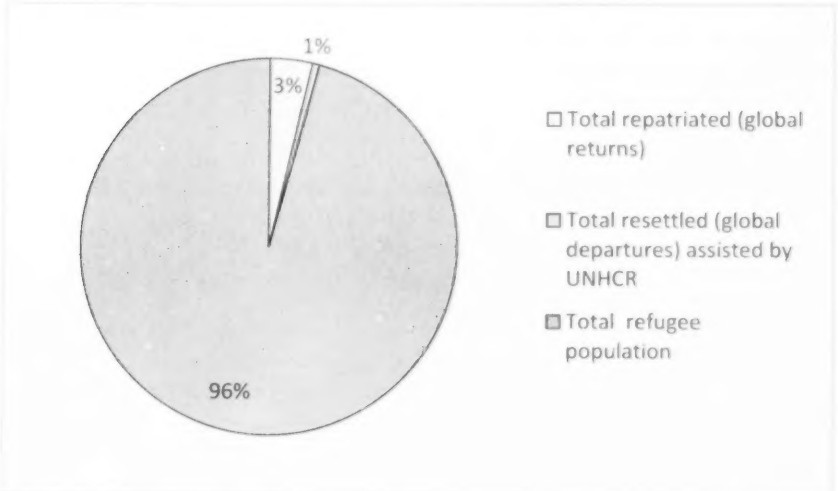
Global trends in voluntary repatriation and resettlement, 2009-2013



Source: UNHCR global trends reports from 2009 to 2014 and resettlement data provided by UNHCR.

Figure III

Voluntary repatriation and resettlement as a proportion of the total refugee population, 2013



Source: UNHCR, "UNHCR global trends 2013: war's human cost" (Geneva, 2014).

While the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has facilitated the return of millions of refugees in past decades, voluntary repatriation has been on the decline since 2011

23. While voluntary repatriation has traditionally been the solution for the largest proportion of refugees, the number of returns has been declining, owing primarily to continuing conflict. The figure fell from 526,000 (320,100 assisted by UNHCR) in 2012 to 414,000 (206,000 assisted by UNHCR) in 2013, representing a small proportion of the total refugee populations of 9.9 million and 11 million, respectively.[16] During the past decade, some 6.5 million refugees were able to return to their country of origin, compared with 14.6 million during the preceding decade.[17] Furthermore, 20 per cent of staff and partners interviewed identified voluntary repatriation as a solution that was not working well.

24. OIOS observed several examples during its field missions that illustrated the challenges facing voluntary repatriation. In Bangladesh, refugees spoke of a previous return operation that did not meet voluntary repatriation standards, meaning that thousands facing continuing persecution in Myanmar had returned to Bangladesh unofficially as a result. Somali refugees in Ethiopia regularly cross the border with seasonal cycles, but are largely unwilling to return permanently to regions suffering from drought, where no services, economic opportunities and/or national protection are available to them. In situations such as the Syrian Arab Republic where UNHCR does not currently support official returns to the country of origin, it monitors returns to ensure that returnees were not coerced and that basic protection standards were met.

Resettlement has provided a durable solution for only 1 per cent of the total refugee population and has been highly resource intensive

25. Resettlement figures have remained steady in recent years. In 2012, 69,252 persons were resettled, while there was a slight increase in 2013, to 71,411.[18] Furthermore, UNHCR reached its internal target of increasing or maintaining resettlement numbers in 73 situations.[19]

26. Resettlement affects less than 1 per cent of the overall refugee population, however. In addition, resettlement needs vastly outnumber the available spots, with UNHCR estimating that 691,000 people were in need of resettlement in 2014.[20] Only a few countries accept resettlement cases, with most refugees being resettled in the United States of America (67 per cent in 2013).

27. The resettlement process also requires significant resources. Of the 368 staff with specific solutions-related titles, 78 per cent work in resettlement.[21] Of the staff and stakeholders interviewed, 20 per cent noted that the process was time

[16] UNHCR, "UNHCR global trends 2012: displacement — the new 21st century challenge" (Geneva, 2013) and "UNHCR global trends 2013: war's human cost" (Geneva, 2014).

[17] "UNHCR global trends 2013: war's human cost" (Geneva, 2014). The decrease is in the context of a general upward trend in terms of the total refugee population.

[18] Data for resettlement provided by the UNHCR statistics focal point.

[19] UNHCR, "Progress report on 2013 global strategic priorities", 2014. UNHCR established 73 of 121 situations as targets, given that resettlement is not an option for all situations.

[20] UNHCR, "UNHCR projected global resettlement needs 2014" (Geneva, 2013). Available from www.unhcr.org/51e3eabf9.html.

[21] OIOS calculations from the UNHCR staff list in 2014.

consuming and limited in impact. One staff member conveyed a common view by stating that resettlement was not perceived so well because it was seen as much work with few people benefitting and that it was an intensive process. Refugees interviewed also expressed high expectations, and frustrations, in relation to the process. The 28 Iraqi refugees interviewed in Jordan brought up three concerns: the lack of choice in terms of resettlement country, UNHCR prioritization criteria for resettlement cases and the lack of transparency in cases of rejection by UNHCR or the receiving country.

28. Refugee-hosting countries wish to see increased burden-sharing on the part of high-income countries regarding refugee issues. UNHCR has sought to use resettlement strategically to address that concern and to facilitate political goodwill and a more favourable environment in such countries. There are, however, few systematic measures of outcomes relating to that approach.

With few exceptions, local integration has remained elusive, although the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has improved conditions for local integration with interim measures

29. Of the three durable solutions, local integration has been the most challenging to measure on a global scale, owing in part to varied definitions of integration and to high political sensitivity in host countries. Local integration includes legal, economic and/or social integration into the host country. UNHCR internal targets are therefore focused on measures of interim steps taken to improve conditions for integration. UNHCR has advocated better naturalization statistics, and 31 countries of asylum now report that, over the past decade, they have granted citizenship to at least 716,000 refugees.[2]

30. A key local integration measure enshrined in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees is the right to work, but the results in that regard have proved limited. In total, 28 States parties to the Convention have restricted that right.[22] In the "Global refugee work rights report 2014", for which right-to-work laws in 15 countries were examined, it was noted that 45 per cent of those countries had a complete legal bar on employment for refugees and that significant de facto barriers to refugee employment were in place in the remaining countries.[23] As observed by OIOS on site visits, employment opportunities for refugees appear largely restricted to camp settings or the informal sector.

31. UNHCR has supported improved asylum conditions and self-reliance by promoting alternative-to-camp policies[24] that allow refugees to live in host communities and by promoting the use of national rather than parallel systems for service delivery. Such programming engenders resilience among refugee populations, which is essential to the success of local integration, return or resettlement. For example, 80 per cent of Syrian refugees in Jordan live in urban environments and have access to national health and education systems. To tackle the complications of service provision in those urban environments, UNHCR has

[22] Helen Morris and Frances Voon, "Which side are you on? Discussion paper on UNHCR's policy and practice of incentive payments to refugees", UNHCR document PDES/2014/04.

[23] Anna Wirth, Cara Defilippis and Jessica Therkelsen, "Global refugee work rights report 2014" (Asylum Access and Refugee Work Rights Coalition, 2014).

[24] UNHCR, "UNHCR policy on alternatives to camps" (2014) and "UNHCR policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas" (September 2009).

offered cash assistance through ration cards that can be used at automated teller machines. Cash programmes in Jordan and other operations have enabled self-reliance and participation in local markets. In Bangladesh, e-vouchers have empowered refugees by providing choice rather than relying on in-kind food provision.

32. Formally recognized local integration has seen limited success, notably in the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia. In October 2014, the United Republic of Tanzania granted citizenship to 162,156 former Burundian refugees (of a total of 197,388)[25] and began the naturalization process for their children. The group was the largest in UNHCR history to be offered naturalization by a host country. In 2014, Zambia began taking steps to integrate up to 10,000 former Angolan refugees (of 53,000) through the issuance of permanent residency permits and the provision of land.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is working towards strengthening livelihoods and self-reliance and aims to systematize and expand such work in the future

33. In the context of those challenges, UNHCR has been working towards developing a progressive approach to solutions to build resilience, encompassing legal, economic, social and political dimensions, led by the Comprehensive Solutions Unit and the Operational Solutions and Transition Section. This is a move in the right direction and successes in some operations could be replicated elsewhere. The launch in 2014 of a global strategy for livelihoods is expected to spearhead efforts for self-reliance measures to improve quality of life and create conditions for solutions. One of the stronger livelihoods programmes is in Ethiopia, where experienced staff work to implement market-based programming and build upon the skills, assets and competencies of the displaced population. In 2014, Zambia developed a country-level livelihoods strategy and partnerships. Projects in Bangladeshi camps include tailoring and soap-making, but local restrictions have prevented the sale of those goods beyond the camp.[26]

C. While political factors beyond its direct control often limit the achievement of durable solutions, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has not fully capitalized on existing opportunities to work within external constraints

Lack of political will and an unsupportive political environment are cited as the most significant obstacles to solutions

34. UNHCR operates in complex environments where several factors beyond its direct control strongly influence its ability to achieve durable solutions. In interviews, 41 per cent of UNHCR staff and stakeholders cited lack of political will and an unsupportive political environment, including the absence of supportive policies, as the primary challenge to achieving durable solutions. Nearly half of Executive Committee and staff survey respondents (42 and 48 per cent, respectively) and 54 per cent of partner survey respondents also cited the lack of

[25] UNHCR, "UNHCR operation in Tanzania", fact sheet, September 2013.

[26] UNHCR, "Global strategy for livelihoods: a UNHCR strategy 2014-2018" (Geneva, 2014).

political will in host countries and/or countries of origin as the main constraint to achieving solutions. The nature of agreements with host Governments that form the legal basis for the presence of UNHCR in a country also has the potential to complicate relationships with those Governments. Of the agreements reviewed for a selection of protracted refugee situations, memorandums of understanding were often non-existent or extremely old and/or part of a larger memorandum of understanding for the entire United Nations country team.

35. In addition to political will, other factors beyond the direct control of UNHCR that have a negative impact on its ability to achieve results include donor fatigue and funding restrictions, the lack of a stable, secure environment in the country of origin, diminishing international awareness and/or interest and fluctuating preferences among the refugee population. Nearly one third of all staff and stakeholders interviewed identified funding levels and/or earmarking as a significant constraint. In addition, the evaluation synthesis results identified that challenges to achieving solutions also arose if situations were less visible or donor friendly, such as with Saharan or Congolese refugees.

36. Furthermore, 20 per cent of all interviewees cited the lack of security and economic opportunities in the country of origin as the primary obstacles to voluntary returns. Refugees interviewed in the field also consistently voiced those concerns. Persistent conflicts in countries of origin, such as Afghanistan, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic, have prevented sustainable large-scale returns. The evaluation synthesis results identified that local integration was limited to countries in which national legislation promoted such a process, as in the United Republic of Tanzania with Burundian refugees. A large proportion of Colombian refugees in Ecuador have not exercised their naturalization option, however, illustrating the challenges that UNHCR faces in working with a population that may prefer to maintain its refugee status. Resettlement opportunities are also affected by political factors. In addition to lower resettlement quotas in receiving countries, host countries such as Bangladesh have halted resettlement owing to perceptions that it is a "pull factor" for new refugees.

37. Those factors were discussed in qualitative interviews with Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan. First, one concern voiced by refugees was that growing donor fatigue, as illustrated by the recent cut in WFP food rations, had posed a challenge to UNHCR in dealing with that increasingly protracted refugee situation. In addition, while refugees expressed differing preferences with regard to remaining in Jordan or returning to their countries of origin, many Syrian refugees mentioned that, while they would prefer to return home, the current economic situation and armed conflict prevented them from doing so.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has not fully explored opportunities to address the constraints

38. While acknowledging those factors, UNHCR can more fully capitalize on opportunities to manoeuvre within the complex environments in which it works. Most significantly, UNHCR has not consistently engaged in strategic advocacy with host Governments regarding local integration measures as a viable solution for refugees. One third or more of staff and partners surveyed, in addition to many interviewed, put forward greater advocacy with host countries at the national, regional and local levels as their primary suggestion for improving solutions results.

A UNHCR staff member in the field expressed a common view by stating that UNCHR needed to be firm with Governments that paid lip service to finding solutions while obstructing efforts to promote them, suggesting that field offices should be allowed to be more comfortable with taking a stand, knowing that they would be supported by headquarters. UNHCR staff in the field pointed out that host Governments were not monolithic entities with a single standpoint. In one country visited, for example, a national policy of non-integration notwithstanding, there were individual champions within the Government more amenable to local integration with whom UNHCR could more effectively engage. According to UNHCR, stronger solutions-oriented advocacy efforts have been made in such contexts as Afghanistan, Colombia and the United Republic of Tanzania. Staff and stakeholders interviewed and surveyed also said that enhanced advocacy with donors for increased and more flexible funding, with resettlement countries for higher quotas and with countries of origin to develop more welcoming environments for returnees could address some of the obstacles around solutions.

39. UNHCR has not always sufficiently generated or strategically used evidence to inform national decision-making and policy formulation around solutions. For example, recent reports from the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford[27] and the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium have featured examples of positive contributions by refugees to the economies and social stability of host States, including through employment creation for nationals. Such evidence-based examples of positive outcomes may facilitate more effective dialogue with national Governments where political will has been lacking, especially in advocating local integration.

40. Building global, regional and national coalitions around the development of solutions strategies was identified in surveys and interviews as a major enabling factor for the achievement of results. Most staff, partner and Executive Committee survey respondents (58, 63 and 57 per cent, respectively) rated UNHCR as being extremely effective or effective in that regard. Widespread feedback from the field, however, identified instances in which UNHCR was insufficiently proactive in building effective coalitions around solutions in particularly challenging political environments. As just two of several examples, poor relations with the United Nations country team in one country have reduced opportunities for joint advocacy on behalf of refugees, while UNHCR coalition-building with civil society has been minimal in another, thus not using the comparative advantage of some non-governmental organizations to engage in advocacy with the Government more effectively.

41. During field missions, OIOS observed several examples of the way in which UNHCR was seeking to approach solutions progressively and collaboratively to tackle external constraints. They included implementing programmes to benefit both local and refugee communities in order to break down resistance to integration, engaging with the United Nations country team by capitalizing on its expertise and networks to move towards a development phase for refugee populations, advocating residency status for refugees in mixed marriages, using return intention surveys of the refugee population to be more strategic with regard to return planning and tapping into the private sector to expand the funding base.

[27] Alexander Betts and others, "Refugee economies: rethinking popular assumptions" (Oxford, University of Oxford, 2014).

D. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has not sufficiently expanded upon its humanitarian imperative to support the achievement of durable solutions, including consideration of development elements

Solutions have required a shift towards a greater development approach

42. The solutions process and the mandate of UNHCR to remain engaged until solutions are found have necessitated more development-oriented programming and longer-term planning than standard humanitarian operations, including a collaborative approach with development actors. The extent to which the mandate demands or precludes more direct involvement in development, rather than transition to development only, is a long-standing debate, both internally and with stakeholders. However, relief models have less relevance in protracted care and maintenance situations, and activities such as livelihoods programming are more closely aligned with development. The General Assembly, for example in its resolution 68/103, and the humanitarian community have acknowledged that the lines between phases are often blurred in that humanitarian-to-development continuum. In a paper from the Refugees Studies Centre, the case is made that dedicated development assistance from donor States targeting displaced and host communities is the critical step in engaging Governments to support solutions.[28] While UNHCR has made some gains in shifting its structure and thinking to accommodate that development dimension, it is still largely operating under a humanitarian service delivery model, which fails to capitalize on opportunities to implement a sustainable solutions-oriented approach systematically. The approach is critical to creating sustainable conditions in the country of origin, in which repatriated refugees can gain access to secure homes and economic opportunities, and to prevent reverse flows back to the original country of asylum.

While the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has undertaken several solutions initiatives, their effectiveness has not yet been determined

43. UNHCR has launched initiatives in the past five years to strengthen its solutions work, including:

(a) The High Commissioner's Special Initiative on Protracted Refugee situations, focusing on five situations (in 2009);

(b) The Transitional Solutions Initiative, a partnership with the United Nations Development Programme aimed at integrating displacement issues into national development agendas, which has been piloted in Colombia and the Sudan (in 2010);

(c) The Solutions Alliance, a partnership of humanitarian and development actors, donors and States aimed at finding new approaches for forcibly displaced persons (in 2014).

44. Internally, UNHCR has taken steps to enhance coordination and field support for solutions. For example:

[28] Alexander Betts, "Development assistance and refugees: towards a North-South grand bargain?", Forced Migration Policy Briefing, No. 2 (Oxford, University of Oxford, June 2009).

(a) Solutions leads, including the Comprehensive Solutions Unit and the Operational Solutions and Transition Section, have been identified by three headquarters divisions;

(b) The "Seeds for Solutions" funding initiative, established in 2014 to aid operations with strong solutions potential, allocated $15 million in 2014 for solutions projects in 18 operations;

(c) The Solutions Steering Group was established in 2014 and mandated to review the organization's approach to solutions, provide technical support and act as an internal cross-divisional coordination mechanism.

45. While such initiatives indicate positive steps, there is not yet a clear understanding of their effectiveness or the extent to which they have been adopted at the field level. Many staff and partner survey respondents were unaware of the initiatives (41 and 72 per cent, respectively), while those who were aware of them gave mixed ratings: 62 per cent of partners and 24 per cent of staff rated them as effective.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has not adequately considered solutions planning in emergencies

46. Promoting a solutions orientation at the onset of an emergency can help to prevent protracted refugee situations, but UNHCR has been insufficiently proactive in that regard. When asked how often UNHCR promoted such an orientation, 64 per cent of staff surveyed indicated that it sometimes or rarely did so. Staff and partners interviewed also highlighted the issue. One senior staff member expressed a common view, stating that solutions were part of the organization's mandate and what it should be doing, but the organization had become distracted by pressing needs and emergencies of an unexpected scope and size. The evaluation synthesis results showed that exit strategies were lacking and that a care and maintenance approach persisted in protracted refugee situations, with little scope for longer-term planning.

Internal structures and skills have limited solutions results

47. Some 30 per cent of staff surveyed identified internal issues as key constraints to achieving solutions. They included a short-term planning and funding cycle, the lack of development-related staff skills, structures and competencies and limited solutions-focused partnerships and partner agreements, including joint programming with the United Nations country team.

48. UNHCR operates under an annual planning and funding cycle, which enables adjustments to needs as they arise in new or continuing crises. The short term of the cycle was, however, identified by 21 per cent of staff surveyed and 30 per cent of staff and partners interviewed as a constraint to solutions programming, which has longer-term outcomes. Several partners interviewed cited it as an administrative and planning challenge, especially in development-oriented programmes such as livelihoods. One non-governmental organization partner interviewed expressed a common frustration, stating that the organization had a three-year programme but could submit a proposal for funding for only six months. UNHCR is often constrained by donor-driven factors such as compartmentalized humanitarian and development budgets and requirements that development funds be focused on

nationals of the country of asylum. Staff also recognized those constraints and the need for multi-year strategies and funding. UNHCR established an internal group in 2014 to review the issue.

49. UNHCR staffing structures, tools and resources are also aligned with humanitarian service delivery models. Some 32 per cent of all staff, partner and government interviewees identified those factors as constraints to achieving solutions. Solutions programming is split between protection or programme units in field operations: resettlement and registration staff are generally part of protection units, whereas livelihoods and other resilience activities fall under programme units. While that model is applicable to the traditional mandates of UNHCR, it leaves little flexibility for more innovative development and solutions-oriented structures. Staff also noted that expertise in livelihoods and vocational training was limited. Direct observation during site visits confirmed that the few senior livelihoods staff deployed in some operations were the exception rather than the rule.

50. Furthermore, in all operations visited, field staff and partners interviewed stated that relationships with host Governments to facilitate solutions often depended on personality factors, highlighting a need for increased diplomacy and advocacy skills among representatives and other senior staff.

Partnerships and engagement with stakeholders on solutions have not been fully utilized to advance solutions objectives

51. UNHCR work with its United Nations partners was not rated highly by the staff surveyed: 33 per cent rated it as effective, 26 per cent as ineffective and 35 per cent as neither effective nor ineffective. Improving partnerships, especially with development actors, was also the second most-cited suggestion by staff surveyed for improving the ability of UNHCR to achieve solutions. Most partners surveyed (86 per cent) noted that UNHCR had been largely effective in communicating with partners.

52. At the same time, staff interviewed and surveyed acknowledged that partnerships with the United Nations country team and non-governmental organizations could be more strategic, especially regarding the transition to development, local integration and reintegration and coordinated advocacy. Most UNHCR partnerships are not focused on solutions — the most common areas of cooperation identified by surveyed partners were protection (55 per cent) and basic needs and services (46 per cent). While UNHCR works effectively with humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund, the International Rescue Committee and WFP, it has fewer joint activities with development-oriented agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme. Furthermore, the evaluation synthesis results showed gaps in post-return reintegration that would be facilitated by such partnerships. One tool to indicate the extent to which refugee issues are integrated into national development plans is the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, which describes the country team's response to national development priorities. Of a sample of 26 Frameworks for countries where there were protracted refugee situations reviewed by OIOS, 9 integrated refugee issues fully, 12 did so to some extent and 5 contained no integration at all. The integration of displacement issues into Frameworks depends on national and country team partners and UNHCR efforts.

53. UNHCR is striving to engage with persons of concern in finding solutions through participatory needs assessments and age, gender and diversity mainstreaming exercises, and generally has some communication with refugee leaders or camp management committees. A positive example observed during a field mission was that staff had developed programmes to combat drug addiction after dialogue with young refugees had revealed that to be a problem. Another example is in Jordan, where mobile phones are distributed during registration, and a helpline receives an average of 2,500 calls per day. While 52 per cent of staff and 56 per cent of partners surveyed rated engagement with persons of concern as effective, staff and refugees themselves highlighted areas for greater outreach, including helping refugees to raise their concerns to Governments and building their social capital and capacity to do so. Refugees and some staff described communication as primarily one-way, noting that opportunities for the displaced to participate in decision-making or receive regular feedback from UNHCR were limited.

V. Conclusion

54. UNHCR is at a critical juncture at which increasing and continued conflict has forced millions from their homes, while millions of others endure long-standing, protracted refugee situations. Emergencies are now becoming protracted, as exemplified by the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic, which in just a year will be defined as a protracted refugee situation. Without consolidated global efforts to find solutions, the number of people living in protracted refugee situations with no end in sight will increase to alarming levels, placing further strain on limited UNHCR resources and the international community.

55. Developing countries bear the brunt of the crisis by opening their doors to those fleeing neighbouring countries, while higher-income countries accept only a small proportion of asylum seekers. Solutions-oriented programming, in which refugees gain access to national systems, out-of-camp dwellings and economic opportunities, is perceived by many Governments as placing additional strain on already overburdened economies and fragile political systems. Yet the alternative — parallel systems and structures and refugees languishing with no opportunity to contribute their considerable skills, experience and knowledge — is far more expensive, less sustainable and compromises dignity.

56. UNHCR has responded admirably, with dedicated staff and a serious commitment to providing services and advocating the rights of persons of concern. While solutions results have not been fully achieved, there is a clear understanding among senior leaders and staff that a stronger solutions orientation is crucial to preventing a situation in which significant numbers of people are in prolonged displacement.

57. Recent efforts with regard to solutions have been a step in the right direction. UNHCR now has an opportunity to systematize those efforts by engaging in more strategic advocacy with Governments, building consensus and more strategic partnerships and refining its internal structures and skills. Rethinking priorities, adjusting strategies and allowing for greater creativity and opportunities to replicate successful initiatives more widely will make the critical difference for the growing number of people suffering in prolonged situations.

58. The ability of UNHCR to make those changes will have the ultimate impact on the lives of refugees by finding a safe, permanent home for those who have been living in displacement and insecurity. As a refugee in the field lamented, "a bird has a nest but we have none".

VI. Recommendations

59. OIOS makes six important recommendations to UNHCR.

Recommendation 1 [result D]

60. **Implement a multi-year planning cycle for solutions-related activities and pursue multi-year funding.** While enabling greater responsiveness to emergencies, the current one-year planning and funding cycle does not adequately support the achievement of longer-term objectives required for solutions. The existence of longer-term planning frameworks would not preclude shorter-term planning for other programming. It is, however, recognized that this recommendation would require changes to the programmatic, administrative and human resource configuration of UNHCR operations for protracted refugee situations. UNHCR should:

(a) Develop and implement operational-level initiatives for protracted refugee situations with a view to designing a three-year framework and planning template, including needs analyses, partnerships models, benchmarks and targets and regular monitoring mechanisms, at the global, regional and operational levels;

(b) Engage in advocacy with donors regarding multi-year funding and restructure global appeals process to incorporate longer-term funding needs.

Indicator of achievement: planning framework template produced

Recommendation 2 [result C]

61. **Develop advocacy strategies for solutions at the global, regional and operational levels.** Effective advocacy at the global and operational levels is critical. Clear, sound and unified messages facilitate more effective communication with Governments and make full use of the political capital of UNHCR to assist in achieving solutions.

Indicator of achievement: global strategy document and operation-level strategies for certain operations in place

Recommendation 3 [result D]

62. **Develop a schedule to ensure the conduct of regular, targeted meetings with development actors around a solutions/transition partnership coordination model.** Given that there are existing coordination models for emergency response, a model for solutions and the transition to development would clarify roles, enable joint programming and provide greater integration of refugee issues into national development programmes and priorities. UNHCR should schedule and conduct meetings with key development partners within and beyond the United Nations to develop that model.

Indicator of achievement: scheduled initial meeting, followed by quarterly meetings, regarding the development of the model

Recommendation 4 [result D]

63. **Develop a staff development strategy to strengthen skills for creating, implementing and assessing solutions strategies.** Emergency and humanitarian response skills are critical to achieving the goals of the organization; however, solutions activities require new skills. They can be acquired by:

(a) Creating a staff development strategy focused on secondments and on-the-job training with development partners and providing training on solutions planning, livelihoods, early recovery and transition, advocacy and implementation of development projects, including monitoring and evaluation;

(b) Developing and/or revising solutions and resilience job descriptions;

(c) Requiring continuing leadership training focused on advocacy and negotiation skills.

Indicators of achievement: staff development strategy, revised job descriptions and training implemented

Recommendation 5 [result D]

64. **Review existing internal solutions structures to assess whether restructuring could improve effectiveness in programming.** Solutions responsibilities currently fall under three divisions and across units at the operational level. An internal reconfiguration at the headquarters and field levels, resulting in a high-level integrated approach with an operational focus, may give greater prominence to solutions programming and clarify roles, responsibilities and internal coordination.

Indicator of achievement: assessment report of solutions structure produced

Recommendation 6 [results A-D]

65. **Create an evidence-based portfolio to be used for strengthening and advocating solutions**, including by:

(a) Conducting regular systematic assessments of solutions initiatives;

(b) Strengthening the documentation and dissemination of lessons learned and/or best practice;

(c) Initiating or strengthening partnerships with academic institutions to answer key questions through research and guide development and advocacy initiatives in relation to solutions strategies.

Indicators of achievement: evaluation plan for solutions initiatives, best practice portal and research plan with academic partners established

(*Signed*) Carman L. **Lapointe**
Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services
18 March 2015

Annex*

Memorandum dated 3 March 2015 from the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees addressed to the Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Management response to the evaluation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Please find attached the formal response of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the programme evaluation of UNHCR by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS). This is provided in the form of two matrices that contain the UNHCR comments on the recommendations and suggested amendments to the text, respectively. UNHCR would like to commend OIOS for its treatment of a complex subject that is self-evidently very challenging to measure. In detailing its responses, UNHCR has recognized the inherent difficulties confronting evaluators in assessing its work on durable solutions for refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless people. Attributing clear cause and effect in the many and varied contexts where UNHCR and its partners operate is no simple matter. In that context, the evaluation has not fully represented the persistence of the political, security and structural obstacles that impede solutions. Many of these constraints clearly lie beyond the ability of UNHCR to influence. Thus, in concluding that improved advocacy could yield greater progress towards solutions, the report would benefit from a deeper reflection on the key factors that prolong protracted refugee situations. It could also record more comprehensively the advocacy efforts that UNHCR continues to make to address and raise awareness of the need for durable solutions in our work on Afghanistan, Somalia, Colombia and the United Republic of Tanzania, to cite a few prominent examples. In our view, this would yield a more balanced assessment of UNHCR work on this issue.

UNHCR nevertheless broadly welcomes the proposed recommendations, particularly as a number of them are in areas where work is already well under way. It is of the view that implementing them may indeed contribute to advancing durable solutions for refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless persons. It looks forward, therefore, to recording further progress on this important component of its mandate.

* In the present annex, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) presents the comments of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This practice has been instituted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 64/263, following the recommendation of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee.